

## INTEGRATING SUSTAINABILITY INTO DESTINATIONS BRANDING: A LITERATURE BASED-REVIEW

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**Abstract:** In today's global challenges, sustainability is no longer a choice but a necessity. Particularly in destination branding, sustainability is a core value that significantly influences tourist choices and shapes the image of destinations worldwide. Therefore, destinations require sustainable branding that meets travellers' expectations, enhances the destination's image and reputation, preserves cultural heritage, protects natural beauty, fosters economic growth, promotes sustainable use of resources, and minimizes climate change and environmental degradation. However, the literature on destination branding lacks a comprehensive conceptual framework for sustainable destination branding. Hence, developing a conceptual framework for sustainable destination branding is essential to provide theoretical and practical contributions. This review aimed at filling a gap in literature by mapping how sustainability is integrated in destination branding by developing a sustainable destination branding conceptual framework. The study proposes a conceptual framework for sustainable destination branding by systematically analyzing and synthesizing insights from 62 peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in the Scopus database. These articles are confined to journal articles published in English discussing sustainable destination branding topics. The evaluation of articles involves assessing the quality and eligibility of the articles through specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The study highlights environmental, social, economic, and geopolitical dimensions as key considerations for sustainable destination branding. The study's findings also underscore the significance of sustainability in strengthening sustainable destination branding. While contributing to the existing body of literature, the paper provides a valuable conceptual and theoretical framework for the advancement of sustainable destination branding. Moreover, this review helps to guide future research and inform policy makers, destination marketers, and tourism stakeholders in developing sustainably-driven destination branding.

**Keywords:** tourism branding, destination branding, sustainable branding, sustainable destination branding, literature review

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## INTRODUCTION

Tourism has affected destinations in both positive and negative ways (Archer et al., 2012). Positively, tourism offers a wide range of benefits: creating job opportunities (López & Arreola, 2019), promoting local products (Madaleno et al., 2019; Ivona, 2021), improving the quality of local communities (Kim et al., 2012), and fostering pride among residents for their unique culture, history, and natural surroundings (Soulard et al., 2024). Moreover, tourism activities have contributed to the overall development of destinations by attracting local and foreign visitors and generating significant revenue (Gnangnon, 2020; Faraji et al., 2020), thereby aiding in the preservation of destinations and improving infrastructure that benefits local communities and tourists (Chong & Balasingam, 2019).

On the other hand, tourism can also lead to negative consequences such as noise pollution, air pollution, water pollution, damage to archaeological sites, the introduction of invasive species, and loss of biodiversity and natural habitat (Gössling, 2002), particularly when not managed sustainably (Panić et al., 2019). For instance, prominent tourism destinations such as Venice and Barcelona have already mounted pressure due to overtourism (Bertocchi et al., 2020; Diaz-Parra & Jover, 2021; Zarhari et al., 2023), which can detrimentally lead to the degradation of biodiversity and natural habitat (Reid et al., 2019).

In order to mitigate these challenges, the concept of sustainable tourism has emerged. Sustainable tourism is one that meets the desires of the present without compromising the capacity of future generations to meet their own needs (Hashemkhani Zolfani et al., 2015). The concept revolves around three interconnected groups: economic, environmental, and sociocultural (Pilipczuk, 2021). The literature has used a wide range of terms, including “pillars” (Basiago, 1995; Pope et al., 2004; Gibson, 2006; Waas et al., 2011; Moldan et al., 2012; Schoolman et al., 2012; Boyer et al., 2016), “dimensions” (Stirling, 1999; Lehtonen, 2004), “components” (Zijp et al., 2015), and “perspectives” (Arushanyan et al., 2017). However, in this study we used the term dimensions. Indeed, given the inherent susceptibility destination to the complex challenges (Reid et al., 2019; Escobar-Farfán et al., 2024), sustainability is no longer a choice but a necessity

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(Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014). Building on this foundation, many academic work has been published. However, despite the fact that a large body of literature revolves around destination branding, Snice Brundtland emphasized the importance of sustainability 37 years ago (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014), the destination branding literature lacks a sustainable destination branding conceptual framework. While some studies have focused on sustainability issues and sustainable destinations (Curtin & Busby, 1999; Curtin, 2003; Wickens et al., 2015; Pulido Fernández & López-Sánchez, 2016; Paunović et al., 2020; Werner et al., 2020; Liasidou et al., 2022; Köchling & Eisenstein, 2024), others have emphasized destination branding models from different perspectives (Qu et al., 2011; García et al., 2021; Gómez et al., 2015; Lai et al., 2019; Mastika & Nimran, 2020). Moreover, many studies tend to focus on only one or two aspects of sustainability--either economic, environmental, or social dimension (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2016).

Furthermore, several recent and similar studies have explored about sustainable destination branding, reflecting the growing academic interest in the topic. For instance, Phung & Nguyen (2023) conducted a bibliometric analysis on sustainable tourism branding, developing an overview of the sustainable destination branding strategies. Similarly, Garanti et al. (2024) carried out a systematic literature review of 26 articles to identify the role of sustainable place branding in the current global context. Aman et al. (2024) performed an integrative literature review to examine the challenges, opportunities, and innovative strategies for destination branding. Appreciating prior literature that highlights different objectives, this review aimed at filling a gap in the literature by mapping how sustainability is integrated in destination branding by developing a sustainable destination branding conceptual framework.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In today's competitive tourism world, destination branding has become a powerful way for destinations to stand out and attract visitors. The idea began to take shape in the late 1990s by Simon Anholt, who introduced the concept of nation branding (Tasci & Kozak, 2006). As the idea gradually expanded beyond nations, tourism destinations worldwide began to recognize the importance of branding in a global market (Pereira et al., 2012; Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017), leading scholars like Ritchie and Blain to offer the first formal definitions of destination branding in the early 2000s (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). According to Blain et al. (2005), destination branding is all about crafting and shaping a unique identity for a destination using images, stories, and emotions to connect with potential visitors.

Unlike product branding, it's not just about logos or slogans (Govers, 2013). A destination branding is shaped by how visitors feel when they are there or how locals contribute to the experiences (Mandagi & Centeno, 2024). It is a blend of perception, reality, and shared meaning (Mabillard et al., 2023).

Nowadays, as global challenges like climate change, environmental degradation, and over-tourism become more urgent (Aman et al., 2024), effective destination branding requires going beyond catchy slogans and pictures and connecting a destination's identity with a deeper commitment to sustainability (Escobar-Farfán et al., 2024). Moreover, as travel became more accessible and competitive (Uyar et al., 2022), destinations required not only beautiful landscapes or historical sites to attract visitors but also a distinct and memorable identity as well as a powerful way to ensure their sustainability and improve their perception in the global market (Haid et al., 2021). Likewise, tourists become more conscious about where and how they travel; often, they seek destinations that value protecting the environment, honoring local cultures, and valuing their future (Phung & Nguyen, 2023). Hence, tourism decision-makers must rethink how they brand destinations toward meaningful stories that reflect real values and a commitment to sustainability (Kusumaningrum, 2023). Sustainable destination branding tells a story that values nature, the local community, and long-term well-being (Lupu et al., 2020). It shines a light on eco-friendly efforts, celebrates local cultures and traditions, and encourages visitors to travel responsibly (Zhang et al., 2024; Aziz & Niazi, 2025). In essence, sustainable destination branding seeks to strike a balance between promoting and preserving a destination to ensure that it remains not only appealing to visitors but also livable and meaningful for both current and future generations.

Consequently, in an increasingly competitive landscape and dynamic world circumstances (Escobar-Farfán et al., 2024), integrating sustainability into destination branding can enable tourist destinations to differentiate their unique selling propositions and connect with potential visitors that are concerned about sustainability (Greaves & Skinner, 2010).

In addition, for a sustainable future, destinations must be branded sustainably and present a concept that positively impacts the environmental, social, and economic dimensions (Liasidou et al., 2022; Garanti et al., 2024; Agapito et al., 2023; de Bruyn et al., 2023). Sustainable destination branding can make a significant contribution to designing competitive advantage (Hanna et al., 2020). Thus, integrating sustainability into destination branding is a key driver of destination success (Roxas et al., 2018). In doing so, this study makes significant contributions to sustainable destination branding, particularly by integrating sustainability and developing a robust destination branding conceptual framework from all perspectives. We believe that building a sustainable destination branding conceptual framework undoubtedly contributes to sustainable tourism and sustainable development goals (Bowen & Sotomayor, 2022; Aziz & Niazi, 2024).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

As illustrated in Figure 1, a systematic literature review (SLR) approach was selected for this review. Systematic literature review provides an extensive view of the literature in a given area and assists in discovering paths for future research (Collins et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2021). Moreover, systematic literature review offers readers an exhaustive understanding of literature in a particular field by providing a comprehensive and organized summary that follows the standard protocols (Tandon et al., 2020). Regarding the database, Scopus was selected to fetch relevant articles. Scopus

is not only among the largest databases of peer-reviewed research articles but also renowned for providing larger coverage, especially in the social science domain (Donthu et al., 2020; Baffoe & Kintrea, 2022; Banerjee et al., 2024). Furthermore, it archives articles that are accessible via other autonomous databases, including Web of Science, Springer, and Emerald (Baffoe & Kintrea, 2022). Consequently, searching Scopus eliminates the necessity of checking other databases, as it would merely yield duplicate results (Banerjee et al., 2024). In addition, Scopus is effortlessly accessible through our university's subscription account. Indeed, most recent review papers have solely relied on Scopus databases for the literature search (e.g., Dowling et al., 2020; De Ruyter et al., 2022; Escobar-Farfán et al., 2024; Banerjee et al., 2024).

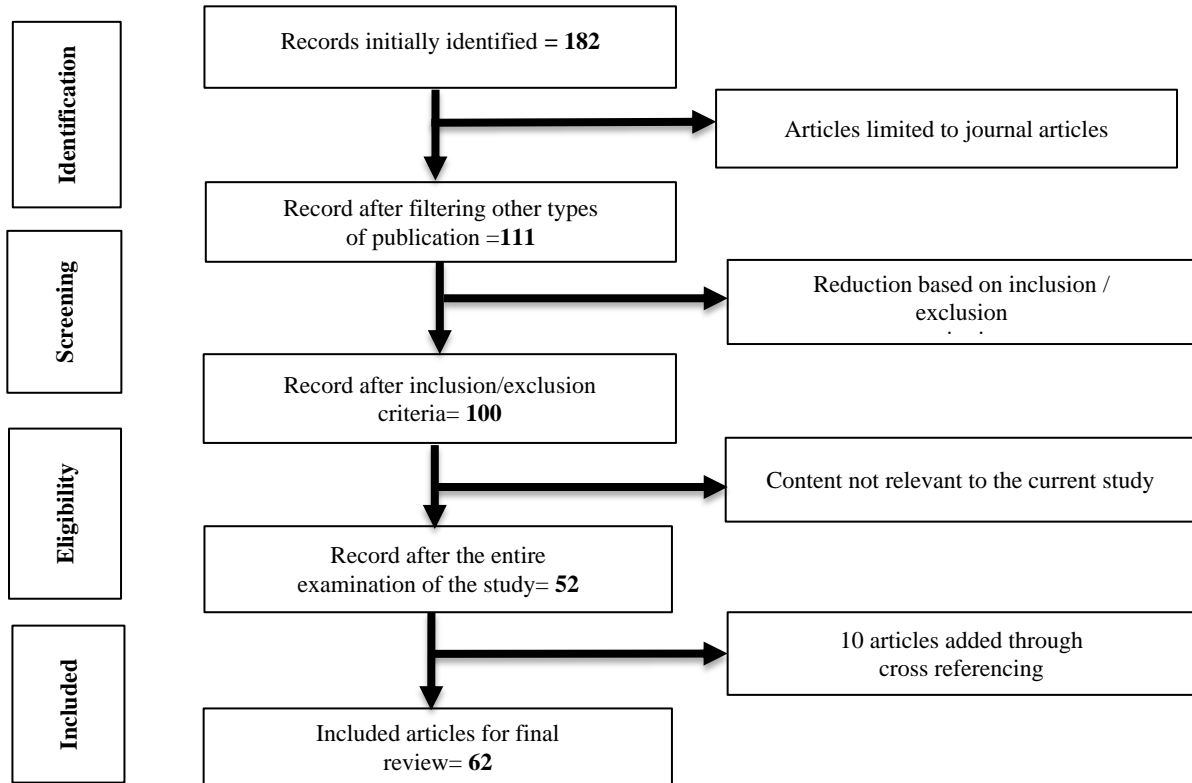


Figure 1. Study selection process (created by authors)

This review is confined to journal articles published in English discussing sustainable destination branding topics. Thus, we identified two terms, i.e., “sustainable destination branding” and “sustainable tourism branding,” as the primary keywords. Subsequently, the combination of these two keywords was used to execute searches in the Scopus database. As shown in Figure 1, initially, the combination of these keywords yielded a total of 182 results. These consisted of diverse types of papers, including books, book chapters, conference papers, journal articles, and editorials. However, in this study, we restricted to journal articles. We acknowledge that including diverse types of publications would have generated thorough results on the topic. Still, we assert that journal articles serve as highly persuasive. Accordingly, after further screening the search results based on types of publications, we narrowed down to 111 journal articles.

In the next step, we focused on the evaluation of relevant articles for further analysis. The evaluation of articles involves assessing the quality and eligibility of the articles through specific inclusion and exclusion criteria (Sizo et al., 2018). Thus, we established the inclusion and exclusion criteria for further analysis. The applied criteria for inclusion and exclusion criteria were as follows: (1) paper must discuss sustainable destination branding or sustainable tourism branding; (2) journal articles published in English only; (3) open journal articles; and (4) not article in press. Following further evaluation of the articles based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, 100 articles remained. Yet, there were cases in which the abstracts were irrelevant to our topic. The scope of this article is delimited.

Consequently, we proceed to another phase where the entire study was examined manually. Finally, following an in-depth inspection of these 100 articles, 52 research articles were deemed relevant for the current study. Furthermore, to enhance the search results, the references list of these 52 papers was scrutinized to discover any more pertinent articles that might have been omitted. As a result, ten new articles were incorporated, and a total of 62 articles (52 + 10) were selected for this review.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we analyzed the content of the articles to identify essential sustainability dimensions that should be included in sustainable destination branding. Based on our understanding of the literature reviewed, we classified these dimensions into four major areas. Classification was performed as follows: All articles aimed at the environmental sustainability of destinations were categorized under environmental dimensions. All papers focused on the economic sustainability of destinations were categorized under economic dimensions. Papers that emphasized the sociocultural

sustainability of destinations classified under sociocultural dimensions. Articles related to geopolitical aspects of destinations were categorized under geopolitical dimensions. After classification, the summary of each dimension and initiatives were presented in percentage for each dimension (Table 1).

Table 1. Identified dimensions and initiatives (Source: created by authors)

Dimensions	Initiatives	Percentage
Environmental	Ensuring the environmental sustainability of destinations can be realized through sustainable destination branding initiatives such as prioritizing ecological awareness, minimizing ecological footprints, minimizing carbon emissions, integrating eco-friendly and eco-certification, providing ecologically friendly communication, offering unique environmental experiences, promoting less visited destinations, and employing crowd management measurements.	24.19%
Social	Local community involvement, promote and protect local cultural heritage, promote diversity and inclusiveness, preserve and understand local customs and norms, and establish mechanisms for community feedback.	41.93%
Economic	Prioritize local products and services to stimulate economic growth, create job opportunities, and diversify tourism products that support and contribute to the life and well-being of local communities.	20.96%
Geopolitical	Foster partnership among neighboring regions, improve the perception of destinations in the global market, collaborate with international organizations, develop effective communication plans to manage perception during geopolitical crises, and clearly communicate security and safety initiatives that ensure safe travel experiences.	12.90%

As can be seen from Table 1, among 62 papers, most of them (41.93%) emphasized on the sociocultural sustainability of destinations. 24.19% of studies discuss the environment and environmental sustainability of destinations, while papers highlighting economic and geopolitical dimensions represent 20.96% and 12.90%, respectively. Figure 2 depicts the sustainable destination conceptual framework, which includes environmental, social, economic, and geopolitical dimensions.

Ensuring the environmental sustainability of destinations branding can be realized through sustainable destination branding initiatives including prioritizing ecological awareness (Ren et al., 2021), targeting responsible travelers (Dolnicar & Leisch, 2008), minimizing ecological footprints, minimizing carbon emissions, integrating eco-friendly and eco-certification, providing ecologically friendly communication, offering unique environmental experiences (Aman et al., 2024), promoting less visited destinations, and employee crowd management measurements (Jankovic et al., 2019; Juvan & Dolnicar, 2016; Marinello et al., 2023). Destination branding is not successful, particularly when neglecting the sociocultural dimensions of destinations (Pedeliento & Kavaratzis, 2019).

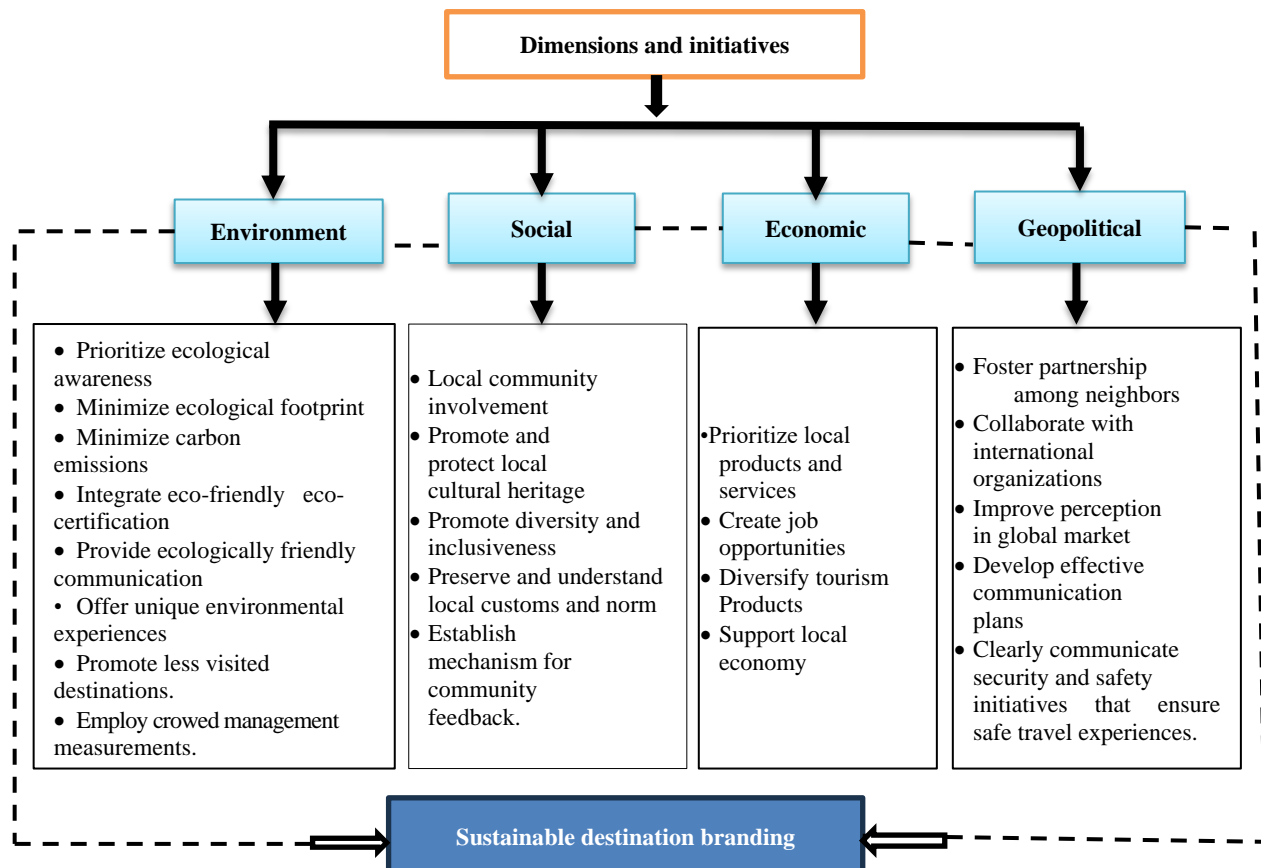


Figure 2. Sustainable destination branding conceptual framework (created by authors)

Hence, considering all initiatives associated with sociocultural dimensions such as preservation and understanding of local customs and norms (Zhou et al., 2024), highlight unique cultural identity and local experiences (Basile & Cavallo, 2020; Radosavljević & Kuletin Čulafić, 2019), engage local community in destination branding process (Chigora et al., 2020; Jernsand & Kraff, 2015; Safshekan et al., 2020; Valek, 2017; Wheeler et al., 2011; Zouganeli et al., 2012; Bowen & Sotomayor, 2021; Tøttenborg et al. 2022), involve all stakeholders (Shoukat et al., 2022; Dieguez & Conceição, 2020), showcase the genuine character of destination (O'Connor & Bolan, 2008; Vázquez Martínez et al., 2019), accessible and inclusive to all background (Machado, 2020), and clearly communicating health and safety concern issues (Vaishar & Štastná, 2020; Chigora & Katsande, 2021; Peña et al., 2023; Toker & Emir, 2023), impact how visitors perceive and feel about destinations (Aldao et al., 2021; Romagosa, 2020). So, establishing sustainable destination branding that integrates sociocultural dimensions not only builds trust and credibility with their target audiences (Bui, 2022), but it also attracts tourists (Rahman et al., 2022), as well as enhances brand reputation and loyalty by showing appreciation for local cultures and making a good impression on travelers (Ezeuduji, 2023).

Furthermore, sustainable destination branding may generate huge revenue by enticing local and foreign visitors to the destination, which can help preserve the destination and investment infrastructure. Participating in and sponsoring numerous cultural festivals, such as religious events, food fairs, gastronomy, arts, traditions, and heritage via concerts, generates income and allows brands to reach new markets (Keskin et al., 2023), while providing visitors with genuine cultural interactions (Chen et al., 2019; Topler, 2021; Kulshreshtha et al., 2023). Also, incorporating creative industries into tourism branding may enhance economic growth and support local communities by promoting local talent, empowering artists, and enriching cultural vibrancy (Jovičić et al., 2019).

Thus, to ensure long-term viability, destinations must prioritize local products, create job opportunities, and support local economies. Traditionally, the concept of sustainability revolves around three dimensions: economic, environmental, and social. However, the literature showed that the geopolitical dimension is also increasingly relevant to the sustainability of destination branding (Vitic & Ringer, 2008). Therefore, we proposed the geopolitical dimension as the fourth dimension of sustainable destination branding. Geopolitical instability and security issues have the potential to disrupt travel trends and significantly harm the brand reputation of destinations and market presence, especially if they are associated with the impacted destinations. Such issues can impact travel convenience, destination preferences, and changes in visa restrictions (Lee et al., 2020). In order to address these matters, foster partnership among neighboring regions, improve the perception of destinations in the global market, collaborate with international organizations, develop effective communication plans to manage perception during geopolitical crises, and clearly communicate security and safety initiatives that ensure safe travel experiences are required.

## CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This review employed a systematic literature review to develop a sustainable destination branding conceptual framework using 62 Scopus-indexed journal articles. While traditional perspectives of sustainability (i.e., economic, environmental, and social) remain central, the finding highlights the emerging relevance of a geopolitical perspective. Critically, incorporating a geopolitical perspective in a sustainable destination branding conceptual framework could offer a competitive advantage, as it underscores regional stability and safety, thereby ensuring safe travel experiences. This expansion is not merely additive but strategic, as it positions geopolitical awareness as a potential source of competitive advantage. By emphasizing secure and stable environments, destinations can differentiate themselves in an increasingly risk-sensitive travel market, enhancing their appeal to safety conscious tourists.

This study makes a significant contribution to sustainable tourism branding in both theoretical and practical ways. Theoretically, it helps to expand the current academic discourses on sustainable destination branding, which only encompass the traditional aspects of sustainability. Practically, the proposed conceptual framework is an opportunity for tourism managers and stakeholders to build sustainable destination branding that emphasizes both the quadripartite perspectives of sustainability. Moreover, it draws the attention of policymakers to crucial and timely issues to consider in the transition toward sustainable development goals.

Despite its significant contributions, this study has some limitations. First, this systematic literature review is based on journal articles that were available in single databases (i.e., Scopus). Therefore, we cannot claim that this study encompasses all the scientific literature and archived material that has been published across all scholarly databases on tourism and destination branding. Second, only peer-reviewed articles published in English were considered in this study. Including peer-reviewed studies published in other languages could have provided a much more comprehensive overview of the study. Therefore, future studies should overcome these drawbacks.

Last but not least, this study proposes a thorough research agenda for future scholars in sustainable destination branding. Highlighting the integration of sustainability into destination branding as it is an increasingly prioritized aspect for contemporary tourists, as well as the application of emerging technologies and artificial intelligence in enhancing sustainable destination branding and fostering innovation and resilience in destinations.

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